



FOSTERING DIALOGUE AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND CHRISTIANITY: INTERROGATING ACTS 17:22-31

Michael Paul Pilani, PhD

Veritas University Abuja
pilaniamaria@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6549-6201>

&

Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, PhD

Veritas University Abuja Abuja
ikee_mario@yahoo.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1977-202X>

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity, using Paul's address at the Areopagus as a foundation for inter-religious dialogue. It explores ATR's core beliefs, such as reverence for supreme being, ancestral veneration, and the sacredness of nature, and analyses models of dialogue, including pluralist and dialogical approaches, to promote mutual respect and understanding. Using historical-critical exegesis, rhetorical analysis, and analytical methods, the study highlights tensions and synthesis between Christian doctrine and African religious practices, drawing parallels with Paul's method of engaging the Athenians. It suggests that effective interfaith dialogue today requires a balance between recognizing shared spiritual pursuits and maintaining theological integrity. Paul's respectful use of familiar cultural and religious references guides contemporary Christian engagement with African Religions, emphasizing the need for language and approaches that honour the beliefs of others while authentically presenting Christian perspectives. The paper concludes that a balanced approach encourages meaningful exchanges between ATR and Christianity, addressing the challenges of modernity and cultural diversity in Africa.

Keywords: African Religions, Christianity, Dialogue, Exchange, Inter-faith

Introduction

The relationship between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity is a complex and evolving dynamic, shaped by centuries of interaction, both collaborative and contentious. As two major spiritual traditions in Africa, their encounters reflect the broader historical view of colonialism, missionary endeavors, and the emergence of African Initiated Churches (AICs) that sought to blend Christian doctrines with African cultural values (Bediako, 1995; Mbiti, 1990). This study, explores these interactions, using Paul's address at the Areopagus as a guiding framework for promoting inter-religious dialogue. By focusing on Acts 17:22-31, where Paul engages with Athenian philosophers through respectful acknowledgment of their beliefs, the study draws valuable parallels for contemporary interfaith engagements between ATR and Christianity. Utilizing a combination of historical-critical exegesis, rhetorical analysis, and analytical methods, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the interactions between ATR and Christianity. The historical-critical method allows for an in-depth examination of Acts 17:22-31, shedding light on the socio-historical context of Paul's discourse and his efforts to present Christian teachings to a diverse audience (Fitzmyer, 1998;



Keener, 2014). Through the theological strategies that Paul employed, such as his use of culturally relevant references, the study illustrates how these approaches can inform current dialogues between ATR and Christianity. This method highlights the importance of context-sensitive engagement which provides a foundation for addressing modern-day inter-religious challenges in Africa.

In addition to the historical-critical approach, the rhetorical and analytical methods enable a closer examination of how Paul's discourse can guide contemporary interfaith interactions. Analyzing Paul's strategic use of Greek philosophical references offers perceptions into the dialogical challenges he faced in ancient Athens and how these resonate with the challenges present in modern interactions between ATR and Christianity (Witherington, 1998). By applying these methods, the study explores how both ATR and Christianity can maintain theological integrity while engaging in meaningful exchanges that recognize and respect each other's spiritual quests and cultural identities (Knitter, 2012). Additionally, this study examines the central beliefs of ATR, such as reverence for a supreme being, ancestral veneration, and the sacredness of nature, emphasizing their importance within African spirituality. These beliefs form the backdrop against which inter-religious dialogue must occur, as they represent core elements of the African worldview that resonate deeply with many believers. Through a balanced analysis of the intersections between these spiritual traditions, the study highlights how models of dialogue, including pluralist and dialogical approaches, can foster mutual respect and understanding between ATR and Christianity.

In this way, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on inter-religious dialogue by offering a framework that balances the theological distinctiveness of both traditions with a commitment to mutual understanding and enrichment. Drawing from Paul's respectful engagement in Acts 17, the paper suggests that successful dialogue requires both a recognition of shared spiritual pursuits and a commitment to preserving theological authenticity. In doing so, it presents a vision for an inclusive and harmonious religious setting in contemporary Africa, where ATR and Christianity can coexist through a respectful and enriching exchange of beliefs and values (Kanu, Paul, and Omenukwa, 2024). This framework not only sheds light on historical interactions but also provides practical insights for addressing the challenges of modernity and cultural diversity, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of Paul's Areopagus address in today's pluralistic world.

Key Beliefs and Practices in African Traditional Religion

ATR encompasses a diverse array of indigenous belief systems and practices across the African continent. Despite its heterogeneity, certain common elements and themes can be identified that characterize ATR as a distinct religious tradition (Mbiti, 1990, Kanu 2014). Central to ATR is the belief in a supreme being or creator God, often conceptualized as both transcendent and immanent (Idowu, 1973). This supreme deity is typically viewed as the ultimate source of existence, though the specific attributes and names assigned to this entity vary across different African cultures. For instance, the Yoruba people of West Africa refer to the supreme being as "Olodumare," while the Akan of Ghana use the term "Nyame" (Olupona, 2014, Kanu 2014). Alongside the supreme deity, ATR recognizes a complex spiritual hierarchy that includes lesser deities, nature spirits, and ancestral spirits. This rich spirit world forms an integral part of the African cosmology and plays a crucial role in daily life and religious practices (Magesa, 1997). The spirit world is often seen as intimately connected with the physical world, with spirits believed to inhabit natural phenomena such as rivers, mountains, and trees. Rituals form a



cornerstone of ATR, serving as a means of communication and interaction with the spirit world. These rituals can take various forms, including sacrifices, libations, divination, and ceremonial dances. Mbiti (1975) argues that rituals in ATR are not merely symbolic acts but are believed to have real efficacy in influencing spiritual forces and maintaining cosmic harmony.

A distinguishing feature of ATR is its strong emphasis on community. The individual is often conceptualized as inherently connected to the broader social group, both living and dead. This communal orientation is reflected in religious practices, ethical norms, and social structures (Gyekye, 1996, Kanu 2013). The famous *ubuntu* philosophy, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of human existence, exemplifies this communal ethos in many African societies (Tutu, 1999). Ancestors play a key role in ATR, occupying a unique position as intermediaries between the living and the spirit world. They are often venerated through various rituals and are believed to have the power to influence the affairs of the living (Kopytoff, 1971, Kanu 2013). The ancestral cult serves multiple functions, including preserving social norms, maintaining familial bonds across generations, and providing a sense of continuity and identity. Nature holds a sacred significance in ATR, with many natural phenomena being imbued with spiritual meaning. This reverence for nature is not merely symbolic but is deeply ingrained in religious practices and ethical considerations. Danquah (1968) notes that in many African societies, certain forests, rivers, or mountains are considered sacred spaces where the divine presence is particularly manifest.

The relationship between humans and nature in ATR is often characterized by a sense of stewardship rather than domination. This ecological ethos, rooted in religious beliefs, has led some scholars to argue that ATR offers valuable insights for contemporary environmental ethics (Kelbessa, 2005, Kanu 2013), including the divine mandate to care and protect it just like other religions. In conclusion, African Traditional Religion presents a rich heritage of beliefs and practices that reflect a holistic worldview integrating the divine, the human, and the natural world. Its emphasis on community, ancestral veneration, and harmony with nature offers a unique perspective on religious experience and cosmic order (Pilani, 2024, Kanu 2014). As Africa continues to traverse the complexities of modernity and globalization, the enduring influence of ATR remains a subject of scholarly interest and debate.

The Concept, Theories and Models of Religious Dialogue

Scholars have proposed various theories and models to understand and facilitate inter-religious dialogue, particularly in the context of interactions between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity. In this connection, religious dialogue refers to the communication between adherents of different religious traditions aimed at mutual understanding and respect (Mansur, 2023). It is a process that fosters a deeper understanding of the spiritual and cultural values of each participant, going beyond doctrinal differences to include an appreciation of each tradition's cultural and ethical dimensions (Knitter, 2012). Several theoretical frameworks offer different perspectives on how to approach and interpret the relationships between diverse religious traditions (Kanu et al., 2024a). The *Pluralistic Model*, advocated by scholars like John Hick, posits that different religions are equally valid paths leading to the same ultimate reality (Hick, 1989). This perspective suggests that both ATR and Christianity offer legitimate ways of connecting with the divine, despite their apparent differences. In contrast, the *Inclusive Model*, developed by theologians such as Karl Rahner, acknowledges the validity of other religious traditions while maintaining the primacy of one's own faith (Rahner, 1966). Christian inclusivists might recognize elements of truth within ATR practices but argue that these truths find their fullest expression within Christianity.



Comparative Theology, championed by Francis X. Clooney, involves an in-depth study of another religion from within one's own faith tradition (Clooney, 2010). Scholars might engage in comparative analysis of concepts such as the afterlife, ritual practices, or moral teachings between ATR and Christianity. The *Dialogical Model*, proposed by Martin Buber, emphasizes the importance of genuine encounter and relationship between religious traditions (Buber, 1937). In the African context, this approach could involve creating spaces for practitioners of ATR and Christianity to share their experiences and beliefs openly (Okeke, Ibenwa, & Okeke, 2017). A more critical perspective is offered by the *Postcolonial Approach*, which examines religious dialogue through the lens of power dynamics and historical inequalities (Kwok, 2005). This model analyzes how colonial legacies have shaped the relationship between ATR and Christianity in Africa, highlighting the need to address historical imbalances in contemporary inter-religious dialogues.

The concept of mutual transformation, where both religions are open to learning and evolving through the dialogue process, is particularly applicable to exchanges between Christianity and ATR (Knitter, 2012). For instance, Christianity might benefit from ATR's emphasis on community and nature, while ATR could engage with Christian teachings on forgiveness and redemption (Okeke, Ibenwa, & Okeke, 2017). These diverse theoretical frameworks provide valuable tools for analyzing the complex interactions between ATR and Christianity. By considering multiple perspectives, scholars and practitioners can work towards more nuanced and constructive forms of dialogue that respect the integrity of both traditions while fostering mutual understanding and cooperation (Usman and Paul, 2024).

Historical Engagement between ATR and Christianity in African Contexts

The interaction between ATR and Christianity has been a complex process spanning several centuries. This engagement has profoundly shaped the religious setting of Africa and continues to influence contemporary African Christianity. In this regard, Christian missionary activity in Africa has a long and varied history. The early Christian presence in North Africa and Ethiopia dates back to the first centuries CE, but the most significant wave of Christian missions began in the 15th century with European exploration and colonization (Hastings, 1994). The 19th century saw a dramatic increase in missionary activity across sub-Saharan Africa, coinciding with European colonial expansion. Protestant missionary societies and Catholic orders established missions, schools, and hospitals throughout the continent. This period, often referred to as the "Scramble for Africa," had profound religious, social, and political implications (Sundkler & Steed, 2000). Early missionary approaches often involved a wholesale rejection of African traditional beliefs and practices, viewing them as "pagan" or "primitive" (Bediako, 1995). This attitude led to significant conflicts and misunderstandings between missionaries and African communities. However, it's important to note that the missionary experience was not monolithic, and some missionaries made efforts to understand and engage with local cultures more sensitively.

Christianity's Adaptation to African Cultural Contexts

As Christianity took root in Africa, a process of mutual influence and adaptation began, often referred to as inculturation or contextualization. This process involves the integration of Christian teachings and practices with local cultural elements, resulting in unique expressions of African Christianity (Mugambi, 1989). Inculturation has taken various forms across different African contexts including the following:



- a. Language and Liturgy: The translation of the Bible and liturgical texts into African languages has been a crucial aspect of inculturation. This process not only made Christian teachings more accessible but also contributed to the preservation and development of African languages (Sanneh, 1989).
- b. Music and Worship Styles: Many African churches have incorporated traditional musical instruments, rhythms, and dance into Christian worship, creating vibrant and distinctively African forms of praise and worship (King et al., 2008).
- c. Theology: African theologians have developed contextual theologies that engage with African realities and worldviews. For instance, the concept of “*Ubuntu* theology” draws on traditional African notions of community and interconnectedness to interpret Christian teachings (Battle, 2009).
- d. Rituals and Sacraments: Some churches have adapted traditional African rituals or incorporated elements of these rituals into Christian sacraments. For example, some communities have developed Christian versions of traditional naming ceremonies or ancestor veneration practices (Magesa, 2004).

The foregoing perspectives of inculturation may not represent a perfect relationship between ATR and Christianity. In fact, it is safe to say that the process of inculturation has not been without controversy. Debates continue about the appropriate balance between fidelity to Christian orthodoxy and sensitivity to African cultural contexts. Some critics argue that certain forms of inculturation risk syncretism, while others contend that insufficient inculturation alienates Christianity from African realities (Bediako, 1995). By and large then, the historical engagement between ATR and Christianity has been marked by both tension and convergence. On one hand, the missionary enterprise often involved the suppression or denigration of traditional African beliefs and practices. Many early missionaries viewed ATR as incompatible with Christianity and sought to eradicate traditional practices (p’Bitek, 1971). On the other hand, there have been significant areas of convergence and mutual influence. For instance, the ATR concept of a supreme creator God provided a point of connection with Christian monotheism. Similarly, the African emphasis on community resonated with Christian teachings on fellowship and the church as a body of believers (Mbiti, 1990). The emergence of African Initiated Churches (AICs) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries represents a significant development in the engagement between ATR and Christianity. These churches, founded and led by Africans, often sought to combine elements of Christian theology with African spiritual worldviews and practices (Anderson, 2001).

Contemporary Dynamics

Today, the relationship between ATR and Christianity in Africa continues to evolve. Many African Christians maintain connections to traditional beliefs and practices, creating a complex religious situation that defies simple categorization (Olupona, 2014). The rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Africa has introduced new dynamics into this relationship. While these movements often strongly reject traditional practices as “demonic,” they also tend to take seriously the African belief in the reality of spiritual forces, albeit reinterpreted through a Christian lens (Meyer, 1999). From the foregoing therefore, the historical engagement between ATR and Christianity in African contexts has been a dynamic and ongoing process. It has involved conflict and misunderstanding, but also dialogue, adaptation, and creative synthesis. This complex interaction continues to shape African Christianity and contributes to the vibrant and diverse religious setting of contemporary Africa. It is precisely for these reasons



that this present paper introduces a novel biblical perspective from Acts 17:22-31 as a handy midwife in this dialogue between ATR and Christianity.

Exegesis of Acts 17:22-31

Historical Context Paul's Visit to Athens in Acts 17:22-31

In Acts 17:22-31 Paul visits Athens during his second missionary journey, typically dated around 50-52 CE (Murphy-O'Connor, 1996). This period marked a significant phase in the early spread of Christianity beyond its Jewish roots into the Greco-Roman world. Athens, though past its political prime, remained a cultural and intellectual center of the Roman Empire. The city was renowned for its philosophical traditions, particularly those of Plato and Aristotle, and was home to various schools of thought, including Epicureanism and Stoicism (Barrett, 2004). This intellectual environment provided both challenges and opportunities for Paul's missionary efforts. The religious context of Athens was characterized by polytheism, with a pantheon of gods and goddesses worshipped through various cults and rituals (Simić, 2020). The Athenians' reputation for religious devotion is highlighted in Acts 17:16, where Paul is described as being "deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Revised Standard Version, [RSV]). This observation sets the stage for Paul's engagement with Athenian culture and beliefs (Fitzmyer, 1998). It's worth noting that Athens, like much of the Roman Empire, practiced religious pluralism. The presence of an altar "To an Unknown God" (Acts 17:23) exemplifies this inclusive approach to religion, which allowed for the possibility of deities beyond those officially recognized (Gill, 1994). This openness provided Paul with a rhetorical entry point for his discourse on the Christian God.

The Areopagus: Its Role and Significance

The Areopagus, literally meaning "Ares' Hill," was a rocky hill northwest of the Acropolis in Athens. Historically, it served as the site of the city's most venerable council, also called the Areopagus, which had once been the main governing body of Athens (Burgem, & Green, 2020). By Paul's time, while the Areopagus council had lost much of its political power, it retained significant prestige and some judicial functions, particularly in religious and moral matters (Dunn, 1996). The council was composed of elite Athenian citizens and was known for its conservatism and guardianship of traditional values (Winter, 1996). The significance of Paul's appearance before the Areopagus lies in several factors. Firstly, it represented an intellectual engagement. The Areopagus was the intellectual heart of Athens, and Paul's invitation to speak there indicates the Athenians' interest in his "new teaching" (Acts 17:19-20), providing a platform for a sophisticated philosophical and theological discourse (Witherington, 1998). Secondly, it served as an opportunity for cultural bridge-building. Paul's speech at the Areopagus demonstrates an attempt to engage with Greek culture and philosophy, using concepts familiar to his audience to introduce Christian ideas. This approach has been seen as a model for cross-cultural evangelism and interfaith dialogue (Flemming, 2002).

Moreover, Paul's appearance before the Areopagus may have had legal implications. Some scholars suggest that it might have been a preliminary inquiry into the legitimacy of his teaching, adding weight to the encounter's significance (Bruce, 1988). The Areopagus also held symbolic importance. With its historical and cultural significance, it provided a symbolic backdrop for the confrontation between Christian monotheism and Greek polytheism. Paul's speech there represents a pivotal moment in the early church's engagement with Hellenistic culture (Keener, 2014). In the context of a dialogue between African Traditional Religion and Christianity, Paul's engagement with the Athenians at the Areopagus offers an intriguing



parallel. Just as Paul sought to find common ground with his Athenian audience while also challenging their beliefs, so too can modern interfaith dialogue seek points of connection while respectfully addressing differences (Bediako, 1995). The Areopagus speech demonstrates a nuanced approach to cultural engagement, one that acknowledges the spiritual seeking of the other (as with the altar to an unknown god) while also presenting a distinct theological perspective. This model of contextual proclamation could inform approaches to dialogue between Christianity and African Traditional Religion, encouraging mutual understanding and respectful exchange of ideas (Mbiti, 1990).

A Rhetorical Analysis of Acts 17:22-31

a. Paul's Opening Remarks (v. 22-23)

Paul begins his address with a *captatio benevolentiae*, a rhetorical device aimed at gaining the audience's goodwill (Witherington, 1998). The Greek term *deisidaimonesterous* in verse 22 is crucial. Traditionally translated as "very religious," it can also mean "superstitious" (Barrett, 2004). Paul's choice of this ambiguous term demonstrates his diplomatic approach, allowing his audience to interpret it positively while subtly critiquing their religious practices. In verse 23, Paul references an altar inscription: *agnōstō theō*, meaning "To an unknown god." This observation serves as a bridge between Athenian religiosity and Paul's proclamation. Scholars debate whether such an altar existed historically, with some suggesting it might be a rhetorical device (Gill, 1999). Paul's assertion, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (ESV), is a masterful transition. The Greek verb *agnoountes*, "not knowing" creates a wordplay with the "unknown" (*agnōstō*) god (Fitzmyer, 1998). This linguistic connection allows Paul to position his message as a revelation of what the Athenians already worship, rather than the introduction of a foreign deity.

b. The Nature of God, Human Origins and Divine Providence (vv. 24-27)

Paul describes God as *ho poiēsas ton kosmon*, "the one who made the world." This creative act is expressed in the aorist tense, implying a definite, completed action. The term *kosmon* here likely reflects the Greek philosophical concept of an ordered universe, appealing to his educated audience (Keener, 2014). The phrase *ouk en cheiropoiētois naois katoikei* (does not live-in temples made by hands) echoes Old Testament themes (e.g., 1 Kings 8:27) and challenges both Greek and Jewish concepts of deity localization (Polhill, 1992). The controversial phrase *ex henos* (from one) in verse 26 is interpreted variously as referring to one man (Adam), one couple, or one race. This ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations across different belief systems (Parsons, 2008). The verb *zēteîn* (to seek) in verse 27 implies an ongoing process. The optative mood in *psēlaphēseian* which means "might feel their way toward," suggests possibility rather than certainty, acknowledging human limitations in the search for God (Conzelmann, 1987).

c. Quotations from Greek Poets, Critique of Idolatry, and call to Repentance (vv. 28-31)

Paul quotes, "In him we live and move and have our being," attributed to the Cretan philosopher Epimenides, and "For we are indeed his offspring," from Aratus's *Phaenomena* (Dibelius, 1956). These citations demonstrate Paul's cultural awareness and his ability to find common ground with his audience. The term *theion*, "divine nature," is strategically chosen. It's a neuter form (of *theios*) that avoids personification, making it more acceptable to philosophical audiences skeptical of anthropomorphic deities (Witherington, 1998). Additionally, the phrase *tous chronous tēs agnoias* (the times of ignorance) connects back to the "unknown" god theme. The verb *hyperidōn* often translated as "overlooked," can also mean "to bear with" or "to pass



over,” suggesting divine patience rather than indifference (Barrett, 2004). The announcement of judgment through *andri hō hōrisen* “a man whom he has appointed” in the concluding verse (v. 31, RSV), introduces a uniquely Christian element into what has been, up to this point, a largely philosophical discourse (Fitzmyer, 1998).

Some Theological Themes in Acts 17:22-31

Paul’s speech at the Areopagus as analyzed above is a significant moment in early Christian engagement with Hellenistic culture and philosophy. It presents a balance of cultural sensitivity and Christian proclamation, revealing key theological themes. Paul’s rhetorical skill and timeless truths resonate in contemporary theological discussions and interfaith dialogues. His approach provides a model for engaging with diverse worldviews while maintaining the integrity of the Christian message, making it relevant for discussions between Christianity and other religious traditions, including ATR, as spelled out thus:

a. Natural Theology

Paul’s speech at the Areopagus is often considered a prime example of natural theology in the New Testament. Natural theology refers to the knowledge of God obtainable through reason and observation of the natural world, without relying on special revelation (McGrath, 2016). In Acts 17:24-27, Paul argues for God’s existence and nature based on the created order. He presents God as the creator and sustainer of the world, appealing to the philosophical and rational sensibilities of his Athenian audience. This approach aligns with the concept of natural theology as later developed by theologians like Thomas Aquinas (Holder, 2012). However, it’s important to note that Paul doesn’t rely solely on natural theology. He uses it as a starting point to bridge the gap between Greek philosophy and Christian revelation, ultimately pointing to the need for repentance and faith in Christ (v. 30-31) (Bock, 2007).

b. Universality of God

A key theme in Paul’s speech is the universality of God. In verse 26, Paul asserts that God made “every nation of mankind” from one origin, emphasizing the unity of humanity under one Creator. This concept challenges both the polytheistic worldview of the Greeks and any notion of ethnic or national exclusivity in divine favor (Keener, 2014). Furthermore, Paul’s description of God as the one “in whom we live and move and have our being” (v. 28) suggests a universal divine presence that encompasses all of humanity. This idea resonates with Stoic philosophy while also affirming the Jewish and Christian understanding of God’s omnipresence (Witherington, 1998).

c. Divine Transcendence and Immanence

Paul’s speech beautifully balances the concepts of divine transcendence and immanence. God’s transcendence is evident in the declaration that He is the Creator of the world and everything in it (v. 24), and that He is not served by human hands as if He needed anything (v. 25). This portrays God as above and beyond creation (Polhill, 1992). Simultaneously, Paul emphasizes God’s immanence - His closeness and accessibility to humanity. The statement that God is “not far from each one of us” (v. 27) and that “in Him we live and move and have our being” (v. 28) presents a God who is intimately involved with His creation (Fitzmyer, 1998). This balance between transcendence and immanence is a distinctive feature of biblical theology, differentiating it from both deism (which emphasizes transcendence at the expense of immanence) and pantheism (which emphasizes immanence at the expense of transcendence) (Wright, 2008).



d. Human Search for the Divine

A significant theme in this passage is the human quest for God. Paul suggests that God made humanity “so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him” (v. 27, NIV). This portrays the search for God as a fundamental aspect of human existence (Barrett, 2004). Interestingly, Paul presents this search as both divinely initiated (God made humans to seek Him) and humanly actualized (people must reach out to find Him). This tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is a recurring theme in biblical theology (Carson, 2002). Moreover, Paul’s approach acknowledges and affirms the religious and philosophical quests of his audience. By referencing the altar to an unknown god (v. 23) and quoting Greek poets (v. 28), Paul validates the human search for the divine while redirecting it towards the Christian understanding of God (Parsons, 2008). This theme provides a powerful foundation for interfaith dialogue, acknowledging the universal human quest for meaning and transcendence while maintaining the distinctiveness of the Christian message.

Interfaith Dialogue in Acts 17:22-31

The preceding discussion shows how Paul’s speech at the Areopagus provides a model for interfaith dialogue that remains relevant today. The passage offers several key implications that can guide contemporary interfaith interactions. One of the primary lessons is the recognition of common ground. Paul begins his address by acknowledging the Athenians’ religiosity (Acts 17:22-23), demonstrating the importance of finding shared points of reference in interfaith dialogue. This approach recognizes the universal human search for the divine, a theme that can serve as a starting point for interfaith conversations (Kärkkäinen, 2003). By identifying shared concepts, such as the idea of a supreme deity, Paul facilitates mutual understanding (Netland, 2001). His initial affirmation of the Athenians’ religious devotion sets a positive tone for the dialogue, an approach that Muck and Adeney (2009) describe as appreciative. In modern interfaith dialogue, this strategy encourages participants to look for shared values, common concerns, or similar spiritual experiences as a foundation for discussion. Another significant implication is the importance of respectful engagement with other belief systems. While Paul ultimately challenges aspects of Athenian belief, his approach is characterized by respect and engagement rather than outright condemnation as found in some religious adherents (Richard, Paul, & Azuwiki, 2024). Paul demonstrates knowledge of Greek philosophy and religion, showing the importance of understanding the other’s perspective (Flemming, 2005). When addressing idolatry, Paul uses philosophical arguments rather than direct attacks, modeling how to express disagreement respectfully (Piper, 1959). He affirms what he sees as true in the Athenians’ beliefs before introducing new ideas, a principle Yong (2008) identifies as valuable in interfaith dialogue. This respectful approach is crucial in modern interfaith dialogue, where the goal is often mutual understanding rather than conversion.

Paul’s speech is also notable for its use of cultural references and shared wisdom. His quotation from the Greek poet Aratus (Acts 17:28) serves as a bridge-building technique, creating a connection between his message and his audience’s worldview (Flemming, 2005). This demonstrates the principle of contextualizing one’s message, making it accessible and relevant to the audience, a concept explored by Hesselgrave and Rommen (2000). Paul’s willingness to find truth in non-Christian sources suggests an openness to shared wisdom across traditions, an approach Pinnock (1992) advocates in interfaith encounters. In contemporary interfaith dialogue, this strategy encourages participants to draw on shared cultural resources and to recognize wisdom in traditions other than their own. A crucial aspect of Paul’s approach is his



ability to balance conviction with openness. He clearly articulates his core beliefs about God and Christ (Acts 17:24-31), demonstrating the importance of authentic self-representation in dialogue, a point emphasized by Newbigin (1989). While Paul calls for repentance (Acts 17:30), he does so as an invitation rather than a demand, respecting the agency of his listeners, an approach Bosch (1991) identifies as crucial in cross-cultural communication. The speech prompts further discussion (Acts 17:32), suggesting an openness to ongoing dialogue and questions, a characteristic Bevans and Schroeder (2004) consider essential in interfaith encounters. This balance is crucial in modern interfaith dialogue, where participants are encouraged to be true to their own traditions while remaining open to learning from others (Onukwuba, Idornigie, Ekpe & Paul, 2023).

Indeed, Paul's approach at the Areopagus offers a model for interfaith dialogue that is both faithful to one's own convictions and respectful of others' beliefs. It demonstrates that effective interfaith engagement involves finding common ground, showing respect for other traditions, using shared cultural references, and balancing conviction with openness. In today's pluralistic context, these principles can guide productive and meaningful interfaith conversations while nurturing mutual understanding and cooperation across religious boundaries.

Framework for Interfaith Dialogue between ATR and Christianity

This study presents Acts 17:22-31 as a biblical text that serves as a model for promoting balanced and respectful dialogue between ATR and Christianity. Thus, it contends that Paul's address at the Areopagus in Athens provides a framework that is well-suited for modern interfaith conversations, highlighting key principles such as finding common ground, respectful engagement, and the strategic use of cultural references. This approach is particularly relevant for interactions between ATR and Christianity, where the goal is often to encourage and promote mutual understanding rather than conversion. A central lesson from Paul's speech is the importance of recognizing common ground as a starting point for interfaith dialogue. Paul begins by acknowledging the Athenians' religiosity, stating, "I perceive that in every way you are very religious." (Acts 17:22, RSV). This approach emphasizes the shared human search for the divine, a theme that resonates with both ATR and Christianity. By acknowledging the Athenians' existing spiritual practices, Paul lays a foundation for dialogue that is not confrontational but appreciative (Muck & Adeney, 2009). In contemporary dialogue between ATR and Christianity, this strategy can be mirrored by recognizing shared beliefs, such as the reverence for a supreme being or a creator, which is central to both traditions (Kärkkäinen, 2003). Such recognition sets a positive tone, facilitating mutual respect and understanding from the outset.

Furthermore, Paul's approach underscores the importance of engaging with other belief systems in a respectful manner. While he eventually challenges aspects of Athenian religious beliefs, he does so with a tone that is both informed and considerate. For instance, Paul's familiarity with Greek philosophy and his reference to their own poets demonstrate his respect for their intellectual traditions (Acts 17:28). As Flemming (2005) notes, Paul's use of Greek cultural references suggests an effort to understand his audience's perspective deeply. This approach can guide dialogues between ATR and Christianity by encouraging participants to understand and appreciate the underlying values and worldviews of the other tradition before introducing Christian perspectives. In line with this, Yong (2008) emphasizes that affirming what is true in another's beliefs before offering new insights is essential for fruitful dialogue. Paul's strategic use of cultural references further illustrates how Acts 17:22-31 can guide inter-



religious interactions. By quoting the Greek poet Aratus, “For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), Paul builds a bridge between his message and the cultural understanding of his Athenian audience. This method of contextualization, as explored by Hesselgrave and Rommen (2000), involves making a message relevant and accessible to the audience’s cultural context. In the context of ATR, this approach might involve Christians recognizing the sacredness of nature or ancestral veneration as expressions of humanity’s search for the divine. Pinnock (1992) argues that such openness to shared wisdom can enrich interfaith encounters, allowing both sides to draw on their respective cultural resources. This strategy aligns well with contemporary efforts to create a dialogue that honors both the Christian message and the cultural heritage of ATR (Kanu et al., 2024b).

The balance between conviction and openness that Paul demonstrates is another crucial aspect of his approach at the Areopagus. He remains firm in articulating his beliefs about God as the Creator and Christ as the appointed judge (Acts 17:24-31), yet he presents his message as an invitation rather than an ultimatum. Bosch (1991) highlights that this approach respects the agency and freedom of the listeners, allowing them to engage with the message without feeling coerced. Similarly, in interfaith dialogues between ATR and Christianity, it is essential that both traditions present their beliefs authentically while respecting each other’s right to accept or reject those beliefs. Bevans and Schroeder (2004) point out that such openness to ongoing discussion is vital for creating a space where both traditions and leaders can learn from each other (Kanu & Pilani, 2024a). This willingness to engage in a continuous dialogue is especially important in contexts where ATR and Christianity intersect, as it nurtures an environment conducive to long-term mutual understanding. In sum, Acts 17:22-31 provides a model for interfaith dialogue that is particularly applicable to the relationship between ATR and Christianity. It demonstrates that effective engagement requires finding common ground, respecting other belief systems, using shared cultural references, and maintaining a balance between theological integrity and openness to new perspectives. As Netland (2001) notes, such an approach not only facilitates deeper understanding but also helps to create a dialogue that is genuinely enriching for all parties involved. By applying these principles, contemporary dialogues between ATR and Christianity can traverse the complexities of cultural diversity and religious pluralism, promoting an atmosphere where both traditions can thrive in a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation (Kanu & Pilani, 2024b).

Recommendations

- i. To promote greater understanding between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity, stakeholders should create more inclusive platforms for dialogue that allow for genuine encounters and exchange of beliefs. Such platforms can be modeled after Paul’s approach in Acts 17, where respectful acknowledgment of existing beliefs provided a basis for meaningful conversation. This would enable practitioners of both traditions to share their spiritual experiences openly, promoting mutual respect and collaboration.
- ii. Religious education institutions, both Christian and those focused on ATR, should integrate contextual theology into their curricula. This approach, which emphasizes the adaptation of religious teachings to local cultural contexts, can help bridge the gap between ATR practices and Christian teachings, as seen in the processes of inculturation. This would ensure that religious leaders are equipped with the tools to engage in constructive dialogue that respects cultural identities while maintaining theological integrity.



- iii. Scholars and religious institutions should prioritize research into the ethical overlaps between ATR and Christianity, such as their shared emphasis on community, nature stewardship, and reverence for the divine. This research can highlight common moral foundations, making it easier to build cooperative frameworks for addressing social issues like environmental conservation, social justice, and communal harmony.
- iv. Training programs aimed at religious leaders from both ATR and Christian communities should focus on the principles of effective inter-religious dialogue, such as listening with empathy and acknowledging historical injustices. This would align with the postcolonial approach that highlights the importance of addressing historical imbalances in contemporary dialogues. Such programs would prepare leaders to facilitate discussions that are sensitive to the legacy of colonialism and respectful of indigenous spiritual heritage.
- v. Religious communities should engage in joint initiatives that address societal needs, such as education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation. Collaborative projects can provide practical expressions of the values shared by both ATR and Christianity, demonstrating their commitment to community welfare. This approach reflects the mutual transformation model, where both traditions learn and grow through active cooperation.
- vi. Both ATR and Christian communities should work towards recognizing the spiritual importance of practices like ancestor veneration within ATR and the concept of saints in Christianity. This would require a shift from viewing these practices as contradictory to instead seeing them as different expressions of respect for spiritual predecessors. By encouraging comparative theological studies, religious scholars can better appreciate the theological nuances of each tradition and find points of convergence.
- vii. In the digital age, leveraging online platforms can be an effective way to expand interfaith dialogues between ATR and Christianity. These platforms can host webinars, virtual conferences, and discussion forums that bring together diverse perspectives from across Africa and beyond. This digital engagement would help to reach younger audiences and ensure that interfaith conversations are inclusive of emerging cultural trends and technological shifts in religious practice.

By and large, this paper contends that by implementing these recommendations, stakeholders in both ATR and Christian traditions can work towards a more respectful and mutually enriching relationship. This would not only enhance understanding between the two faiths but also contribute to a more harmonious coexistence within Africa's diverse religious contexts.

Conclusion

The study highlights the significance of Acts 17:22-31 as a framework for respectful engagement with non-Christian religious beliefs, providing a model for inter-religious dialogue. Paul's approach at the Areopagus is characterized by his strategic use of cultural and religious references familiar to his Athenian audience, which allowed him to introduce Christian teachings without hostility or dismissal of their existing beliefs. By acknowledging their religious sentiments and drawing on shared cultural touchpoints, Paul established a bridge for meaningful dialogue and conveyed his message in a way that was both respectful and profound. The implications of this model are particularly relevant for contemporary church practices. In a pluralistic society where, inter-religious interactions are increasingly common, the church can learn from Paul's example, adopting strategies that prioritize understanding and mutual respect. Utilizing language and references that resonate with the beliefs and values of



others can create a space for genuine engagement, making it possible to share Christian perspectives without alienating or disparaging other faith traditions.

Moving forward, the church's commitment to using contextual and respectful language in inter-religious encounters will be crucial. Such an approach not only nurtures positive relationships with people of different religious backgrounds but also embodies the spirit of Christ's love and openness. As this study suggests, applying the principles from Paul's Areopagus speech can enable the church to engage in dialogues that are both truthful to the Christian message and respectful of the religious diversity present in the world today. Ultimately, embracing this model can lead to deeper understanding, shared learning, and a more harmonious coexistence among various religious communities.

References

- Anderson, A. (2001). *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century*. Africa World Press.
- Barrett, C. K. (2004). *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*. T&T Clark.
- Battle, M. (2009). *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me*. Seabury Books.
- Bediako, K. (1995). *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Bevans, S. B., & Schroeder, R. P. (2004). *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. Orbis Books.
- Bosch, D. J. (2011). *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Orbis Books.
- Bruce, F. F. (1988). *The Book of the Acts* (Rev. ed.). Eerdmans.
- Buber, M. (1955). *I and Thou*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Clooney, F. X. (2010). *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Conzelmann, H. (1988). *Acts of the Apostles: A commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*. Fortress Press.
- Danquah, J. B. (2017). *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*. Cass
- Dibelius, M. (1956). *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*. SCM Press.
- Dunn, J. D. G. (2016). *The Acts of the Apostles*. Eerdmans.
- Fitzmyer, J. A. (1998). *The Acts of the Apostles: A new translation with introduction and commentary*. Yale University Press.
- Flemming, D. (2002). "Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens: Paul's Areopagus Address as a Paradigm for Missionary Communication." *Missiology*, 30(2), 199-214.
- Flemming, D. (2005). *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission*. InterVarsity Press.
- Gill, D. W. J. (1994). "Acts and the Urban Elites." In D. W. J. Gill & C. Gempf (Eds.), *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting: Vol. 2. Graeco-Roman Setting* (pp. 105-118). Eerdmans.
- Gill, D. (1999). "Dionysios and Damaris: A note on Acts 17:34." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 61(3), 483-490.
- Gyekye, K. (1996). *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Sankofa Publishing Company.
- Hastings, A. (1996). *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*. Clarendon Press.



- Hesselgrave, D. J., & Rommen, E. (2003). *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models*. William Carey Library.
- Hick, J. (2005). *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. Yale University Press.
- Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. SCM Press.
- Okeke, C. O., Ibenwa, C. N., & Okeke, G. T. (2017). Conflicts Between African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Eastern Nigeria: The Igbo Example. *Sage Open*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017709322>.
- Kanu, I. A., & Pilani, M. P. (2024a). “Semiotic hermeneutic of ‘new wine, new wineskins’: Symbols, philosophy of development, and Africa.” *Dialogue and Universalism*, 35(2), 151–164. <https://doi.org/10.5840/du202434225>
- Kanu, I. A., & Pilani, M. P. (2024b). “The Arewa symbol: A confluence of philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions.” *Dialogue and Universalism*, 35(2), 223–237. <https://doi.org/10.5840/du202434229>
- Kanu, I. A., Kanyip, P. B., Paul, P. M., Kamai, P. H., Onukwuba, M., Omenukwa, P. C., & Vasumu, I. (2024). “Influence of media on religio-cultural development and academic performance of youths in Nigeria.” *International Journal of Religion*, 5(10), 2164-2173. <https://doi.org/10.61707/nfed6t84>.
- Kanu, I.A., Kanyip, B.P., Paul, P.M., Omenukwa, P.C., Kamai, P.H. and Agbede, O. (2024) “Globalization and Educational Development of Nigerian Youths: Towards an Epistemology of Social Change” *Tuijin Jishu/Journal of Propulsion Technology*, 45(3).
- Kanu, I.A., Paul, P.M. and Omenukwa, P.C., (2024). Philosophy of Emotional Intelligence in the Light of 1 Kings (12:1-19): “The Intersection of Philosophy, Psychology and Scripture.” *Tuijin Jishu/Journal of Propulsion Technology*, 45(3).
- Kanu, I., A. (2013). “On the Sources of African Philosophy”. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 2(1) 337-356.
- Kanu, I., A. (2013). “The Dimensions of African Cosmology”. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 2(2) 533-555.
- Kanu, I., A. (2014). “Igbo Proverbs as *depositum* of Igbo-African philosophy”. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. 4(1)164-168.
- Kanu, I., A. (2014). “The Place of Igbo Myths in Igbo-African Philosophy”. *American Journal of Contemporary Research*. 4(2) 34-50
- Kanu, I., A. (2014). “The Nature and Meaning of African Philosophy in a Globalizing World”. *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education*. 1(7) 86-94.
- Kanu, I., A. (2014). “African Traditional Religion in a Globalizing World”. *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education*. 1(8) 4-12.
- Kärkkäinen, V. M. (2003). *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical & Contemporary Perspectives*. InterVarsity Press.
- Keener, C. S. (2014). *Acts: An exegetical commentary*. Baker Academic.
- Kelbessa, W. (2005). “The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Africa.” *Diogenes*, 52(3), 17-34.
- King, R., Kidulam J. N., Krabill, J. R. & Oduro, T. A. (2008). *Music in the Life of the African Church*. Baylor University Press.
- Knitter, P. F. (2002). *Introducing Theologies of Religions*. Orbis Books.
- Kopytoff, I. (1971). “Ancestors as Elders in Africa.” *Africa*, 41(2), 129-142. [doi:10.2307/1159423](https://doi.org/10.2307/1159423)



- Kwok, P. (2005). *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Magesa, L. (1997). *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. Orbis Books.
- Magesa, L. (2014). *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*. Orbis Books.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1975). *Introduction to African Religion*. Heinemann.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African Religions and Philosophy* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.
- Meyer, B. (1999). *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Muck, T. C., & Adeney, F. S. (2009). *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-first Century*. Baker Academic.
- Mugambi, J. N. K. (1989). *African Christian Theology: An Introduction*. East African Educational Publishers.
- Murphy-O'Connor, J. (1998). *Paul: A Critical Life*. Oxford University Press.
- Netland, H. A. (2001). *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission*. InterVarsity Press.
- Newbigin, L. (1989). *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Eerdmans.
- Olupona, J. K. (2014). *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Onukwuba, M., Idornigie, P. O., Ekpe, I. P., & Paul, P. M. (2023). "Who is my neighbour?: Law and religion." *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, 11(11), 59-68. <https://doi.org/10.24940/theijhss/2023/v11/i11/HS2311-017>
- p'Bitek, O. (1971). *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. East African Literature Bureau.
- Parsons, M. C. (2008). *Acts*. Baker Academic.
- Pilani, M. P. (2024). "Environmental Stewardship and Dignity of Labour in Gen 2:4b-15 and its Challenges for Nigeria." *Theology and Science*, 22(4), 774–789. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2024.2399901>
- Pinnock, C. H. (1992). *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*. Zondervan.
- Polhill, J. B. (1992). *Acts Acts: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (The New American Commentary)*. Holman Reference.
- Rahner, K. (1966). *Theological Investigations, Volume 5: Later Writings*. Darton, Longman & Todd.
- Richard, G. E., Paul, P. M., & Azuwike, A. (2024). "Religio-political situation in Northern Nigeria: The limits of the law and fault lines in Christian response to Islam." *Journal of Religion and Society, (JORAS)* 13, 1-17.
- Sanneh, L. (1989). *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Orbis Books.
- Simić, A. (2020). "Old gods and the new: (Re)invention of Athenian cults in the Hellenistic period." *Carnival*, 20, 223-242. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4337795>.
- Mansur, M. (2023). Religious polarization, religious dialogue and Islamic education: Characteristics of interreligious communication patterns in building tolerance and harmony in schools. *International Journal of Engineering Business and Social Science*, 1(5), 411-418.



- Piper, O. A. (1959). "Paul before the Areopagus and Other New Testament Studies." *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1959) 78 (2): 170–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3264949>
- Sundkler, B., & Steed, C. (2000). *A History of the Church in Africa*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tutu, D. (2000). *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Image.
- Usman, J. H. and Paul, P. M. (2024) "Conflict Resolution Beyond Identity: Insights on Peacebuilding from Acts 6:1-7," *Journal of Religion and Society (JORAS)* 13 (2024): 58-73.
- Burgem, G. M., & Green, G. L., (2020). *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament within Its Cultural Contexts* (2nd ed.). Zondervan Academic.
- Winter, B. W. (1996). "On Introducing Gods to Athens: An Alternative Reading of Acts 17:18-20." *Tyndale Bulletin*, 47(1), 71-90. <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30381>
- Witherington, B. (1998). *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Eerdmans.
- Yong, A. (2003). *Beyond the impasse: Toward a pneumatological theology of religions*. Baker Academic.
- Yong, A. (2008). *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*. Orbis Books.